

**PRAYER SEATS ON THE MOUNTAINS:  
A FOCUS ON THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF RELIGIOUS AND RITUAL FEATURES IN SITES**

JOSEPH L. CHARTKOFF  
MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY

*Cultural anthropologists have long recognized the significance of religion in the operations of cultures, and have documented a great deal about rituals and religious beliefs and practices in traditional Native California societies. California archaeologists have periodically reported on the discovery of religious and ritual features in sites, but the topic of the archaeological study of religion and ritual has never been one of the major sectors in the literature of California archaeology. This article discusses an example based on the discovery and recording of Yurok ritual sites observed in the Siskiyou Mountains of northwestern California during the G-O Road Project in 1978. It uses these sites as a basis for discussing the study of religiously related and ritually related archaeological remains as a significant element of California's archaeological record.*

The purpose of this article is to encourage the formation of a more formally defined component of the literature of California archaeology: the archaeological study of religion and ritual. It is not the case that California archaeologists have ignored the topics of religion and ritual. One can look through journal articles and textbooks, in addition to the papers that have been presented at the Society for California Archaeology conference meetings for nearly five decades, and find many discussions about evidence discovered that is related to rituals and religious practices. Rock art features, burial practices, and ritual-related artifacts are some examples.

When one examines the topical divisions of books and articles, however, there are certain themes or subjects which are presented as major themes, such as habitat, subsistence practices, tool technology, trading and exchange, housing and architecture, migration and settlement, and social ranking. Religion and ritual tend not to be treated at the same level of generality, as themes for chapters in books or sections in reports. In general, archaeologists tend to give ritual and religion less emphasis than do cultural anthropologists as factors which help shape cultures. (See, for example, Chartkoff and Chartkoff 1984; Fagan 2003; Jones and Klar 2007; Moratto 2004.) I suggest, in terms of working to define, analyze, and interpret key elements of cultures of the past, that we archaeologists consider moving a bit closer to the perspectives of cultural anthropologists in this regard.

**A CASE: THE SISKIYOU MOUNTAINS ROCK CIRCLES**

A case that has inspired me to take this position involves a group of rock feature sites that were first recorded archaeologically in 1978 when I was working on the Gasquet-Orleans (G-O) Road Project for the U.S. Forest Service in the Siskiyou Mountains of northwestern California (see Chartkoff and Chartkoff 1979). Dorothea Theodoratus and I co-directed the cultural resource management study of a proposed logging road that was to be built across the Siskiyou Mountains from the village of Gasquet on the Smith River to the town of Orleans on the Klamath River. More than a half-dozen pathways for the logging road were suggested, and under state and federal legal requirements, each proposed roadway had to be examined to determine whether any sites or materials of cultural or archaeological significance would be damaged should a road be built across them. The proposed roadways lay within the traditional territories of the Yurok people, who still had a number of communities and a formal tribal government in the region. By collaborating with the Yurok leadership, we were able to gain their acceptance of us conducting the project, and we hired their chosen representative, James Stevens, to work with us as a direct observer of what we did and found.

Stevens, who was known locally as Jimmy Skunk, did an excellent job of observing and reporting for the Yurok tribal administration. He also turned out to be a very valuable source of information about cultural uses of the logging road region by tribal members, ranging from subsistence practices to ritual activities. Our archaeological survey team, which I had brought there from Michigan State University, consisted of more than a dozen graduate and undergraduate students who were all well experienced in archaeological surveying and excavation. We did no excavation on the G-O Road project, but we systematically surveyed all the proposed alternative logging road routes and the territory around them. In addition to finding seasonal camp sites, tool crafting locations, and animal butchering places, we found some very old pathways from the Klamath River region up to the crest ridges of the Siskiyou Mountains, which were from 5,000 to 6,000 ft. higher in elevation than the banks of the Klamath River, and whose trail paths were often more than 10 mi. long. Along these paths were found a number of small stone rock features. Jimmy informed us that they were places where people traveling from the Klamath River villages to the mountain crests would stop to perform rituals while on their trip. The carrying of stones from the low elevations up the mountain trails was itself part of the ritual activities involved in the mountain-ascending trips. The travelers would stop at particular places, conduct traditional ritual activities there, and leave the stone at the site as part of their ritual behavior.

At the tops of the mountain ridges, we found a number of more complex rock features, some of which were shown to us by Jimmy. The type of feature built there was a stone-walled enclosure. They were called stone circles, but the ones we saw were more typically in the shape of the letter U, with its opening facing east. The common size was a cobblestone wall about 2.5 to 3.0 ft. high, with an opening 3.0 to 3.5 ft. wide, and the length of the long side in the range of 5.0 to 6.0 ft. Jimmy told us they were prayer vigil sites, used by individuals who hiked up the mountain from their village along the Klamath River. Because these semicircles were on the mountain ridge crests and because they faced eastward, on a clear day it was possible to see the snow-covered cone of the Mount Shasta volcano, which lay more than 100 mi. farther to the east, beyond the Sacramento River. The ability to see such a dramatic landscape feature that was so far away gave the rock circles an extremely unique and dramatic quality, which helped make them such important sites for ritual activities.

The ethnographic literature that had been published about traditional Yurok culture by distinguished ethnographers such as Alfred Kroeber and others provided information about the meaning and uses of these mountain-crest rock circles. Ethnographers learned from Yurok villagers that the rock circles were visited for a variety of personal religious experiences, such as meditation retreats and coming-of-age ceremonies. For example, when a girl in one of the Yurok villages along the Klamath River reached her biological age of maturation and began to menstruate, she was given a personal ritual experience as the core of her coming-of-age ceremony. One of her aunts, who was a sister of her mother, took the girl on a trip along the nearest pathway up the mountains from her village to the crest, a trip which itself took at least a day of up-hill hiking. When they came to the mountain crest, they would go to the rock circle that their village normally used. The girl would be directed to sit in the stone circle, facing east, all day long for seven days, and undertake the meditations she had been taught to make. The girl would gaze over the mountain crests toward Mount Shasta. Her aunt would take care of her, feeding her, protecting her, letting her sleep protected at night, and teaching her what she was supposed to learn about becoming a woman. As a result, the girl would gain the strength, knowledge, and insight to enable her to be transformed into a woman, and to carry the rest of her life forward successfully as an adult. At the end of the ritual experience, the aunt would lead her niece back down the mountain trail to their village. There the village would hold a formal coming-of-age public ceremony, and the aunt would present the girl to her fellow villagers as a now-transformed woman.

#### **COVERAGE OF RITUAL AND RELIGION IN CALIFORNIA'S ARCHAEOLOGY LITERATURE**

This case is an appropriate example of a perspective on the religious significance of an archaeological feature. Recognition of religiously significant features is hardly unknown in our

archaeological literature, but when you search through the publications, it is difficult to find discussions of the examples, the meaning and the significance of religious and ritual remains, that are comparable in size and emphasis with the discussions of such topics as tool technology, trading and exchange, subsistence, settlement, conflict, or architecture. When one examines books on California archaeology, such as those by Michael Moratto, Brian Fagan, or myself, one does not tend to find a chapter on prehistoric ritual and religion, though Fagan does mention evidence about rituals in several chapters. Tony Platt's book, *Grave Matters*, is an interesting exception, since it focuses on archaeological studies of burials (Platt 2011).

Similarly, the indices of the *Proceedings of the Society for California Archaeology* also indicate a scarcity of focus on the archaeology of ritual and religion. The *Proceedings* have published well over 2,000 articles since their onset in 1988. The scarcity of articles focused on ritual and religion is another indicator of the minimal amount of emphasis given to these topics. Several dozen of the articles in the *Proceedings* do address issues dealing with archaeological dimensions of ritual and religion, but those constitute less than 2 percent of the total number of articles, which illustrates again the minimal role played by the archaeology of ritual and religion in the discipline overall. Similarly, the journal *California Archaeology*, which is just reaching its sixth year and therefore has published just a few hundred articles overall, has equally minimal content given to the archaeology of ritual and religion.

The only area of archaeological evidence concerning ritual and religion that has had substantial coverage over the years has been the study of burial practices and evidence. This topic has become extremely offensive to Native American communities, not just in California but nationwide, because it is seen as a violation of sacred remains. Burial study has been given decreasing attention in recent decades. I remember, however, that my own professor at UCLA, Clement Meighan, was very interested in burial excavations, not just because of what they taught us about the values and beliefs of past cultures, but because they also yielded great opportunities for site dating, culture identification, social classification, and other such areas of data about the societies that made the burials.

### **SOME VALUES IN THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL STUDY OF RITUAL AND RELIGION**

Although the study of burials creates a good deal of antipathy toward archaeology from Native American communities, there are a number of other aspects of religion and ritual that can be explored archaeologically without creating the same kind of negative perspectives, but which can lead to a great deal of useful information and insight concerning the cultures of past communities. The identification of places of ritual activities and the recording of them as archaeological sites can provide them with legal protection from development and destruction that is more effective than simply declaring them to be sacred places. Not only does such legal recognition give effective protection against damage or destruction during construction or development projects, it can also prevent the need for archaeological excavation when construction or development projects are not allowed to go forward.

### **REFERENCES CITED**

Chartkoff, Joseph L., and Kerry K. Chartkoff

- 1979 Archaeological Resources of the Chimney Rock Section, Gasquet-Orleans (G-O) Road, Six Rivers National Forest, California. In *Cultural Resources of the Gasquet-Orleans (G-O) Road, Six Rivers National Forest, California*, by Dorothea Theodoratus, Joseph L. Chartkoff, and Kerry K. Chartkoff. Six Rivers National Forest, Eureka, California.

- 1984 *The Archaeology of California*. Stanford University Press, Stanford, California.

Fagan, Brian

- 2003 *Before California: An Archaeologist Looks at Our Earliest Inhabitants*. Rowman and Littlefield, Lanham, Maryland.

Jones, Terry L., and Kathryn A. Klar (editors)

2007 *California Prehistory: Colonization, Culture, and Complexity*. AltaMira Press, Lanham, Maryland.

Moratto, Michael J.

2004 *California Archaeology*. 2nd ed. Coyote Press, Salinas, California.

Platt, Tony

2011 *Grave Matters: Excavating California's Buried Past*. Heyday, Berkeley, California.